

Jo'burg silk pens new 'Dinner for two'

BY JEAN MEIRING,
JOHANNESBURG BAR

'When my father passed away in March 2009, I realised one can't postpone one's dreams indefinitely.'

Les Morison smiles ironically.

'And I lost the anxiety about embarrassing my family.'

It's a mere two years later and Les, a top Johannesburg commercial silk and founder of the legal website The Common Room, recently saw his debut play *The Prize of Peace* complete a successful run at the Old Mutual Theatre on the Square in Sandton.

What's more, many reviewers doled out praise. *The Star* wrote: 'One usually has to be careful and considerate when reviewing a very new play because it still has its journey ahead of it. ... But already, *The Prize of Peace* has the ingredients of a South African classic.'

The play is set in Oslo in December 1993 on the eve of the Nobel Prize ceremony and shortly before South Africa's first democratic election. It imagines what might have been if Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk met for dinner and conversed – against the background of a nefarious plot.

With the honed skills of a seasoned lawyer, Les sets up an engrossing exchange between the men and shows audiences how things might have turned out differently.

'I always fantasised about being a writer: clad in khaki shorts and a denim shirt on a beach staring mistily into the distance. I realised if I waited to get uninterrupted time to write creatively, I would never write. I would have to write as I work: at home, in chambers with dictaphone in hand.'

'At varsity in Maritzburg my first degree was in English and Philosophy, and my

then-girlfriend (later my first wife) was studying for an MA in feminist theatre. Through her I had a prolonged exposure to the professional theatre world.

'But law and the theatre don't mix easily – I'd come home from work in the evening and she'd leave for work – and we parted ways.'

Les is now married to fellow Johannesburg counsel Ingrid Opperman.

'I was intent on writing prose. Then I started dictating conversations. I'd walk in the garden and talk into my dictaphone – and have a typist type it up. Then I'd edit the text. This made the writing process much easier.'

Once the play was completed, Les's wife showed it to a friend on the board of the Saheti School in Johannesburg. The friend took a copy of the play to a lunch at the home of George Bizos, and he mentioned it to Daniella Pitt, a teacher at Saheti. She read the play and was so impressed she suggested it be performed at the school. This encouraged Les to seek out Clare Stopford, renowned theatre director and dramaturg. She gave Les friendly advice on re-writing the play.

'The run at Saheti was a wonderful experience, but I also saw flaws in the play.'

Les returned to Clare, who decided to incorporate the project into her MA on working with South African theatre writers. She agreed to cast, direct and supervise the re-write. Les and Daphne Kuhn of the Old Mutual Theatre on the Square shared the role of producer.

'I realised how much I had to learn, like "killing off your darlings". A play is not a

bucket for all your ideas. Some of your most treasured bits must be lopped off to make a piece say what needs to be said and no more. Tight, punchy and truthful.

'The play eventually went through sixteen drafts.'

With renowned actors Eric Nobbs and Owen Sejake in the central roles, the opening run of three weeks was a big critical success, and has whetted Les's appetite for the professional theatre, as writer and producer.

'I was told that when you debut, you must always have a second piece in the pipeline.'

'I've written two more pieces for the stage. The one, entitled *The Pride*, is about a group of *homo sapiens* discriminating against and, ultimately, eradicating the Neanderthals. It explores how people hypocritically project their own deficiencies onto others.'

'Second, I've completed the narrative component around some songs from a compilation of post-Beatles John Lennon.'

'But having worked with professionals, I've realised I must go back to the drawing board. I've learnt many lessons and have started developing a theatrical ear.'

While Les the writer hones his craft, Les the producer is busily planning further runs of the *The Prize of Peace*.

'We're waiting to hear from Grahamstown. We're considering the Edinburgh Festival, and other places abroad. Even Oslo itself.'

It doesn't take a genius to notice Les Morison has no shortage of ideas – nor of dreams to pursue. 



Elise Van Niekerk as the Chef, Owen Sejake as Nelson Mandela, Eric Nobbs as FW De Klerk and Maphuti Komape as the Security Chief.